“T he sheer industry of doing a lot of outdoor painting over days and weeks can have a huge, positive impact on artists’ work, especially if they exchange ideas and support,” says Rachel Pettit. “I know how important that industry is because around the time I was moving from studio to outdoor painting I lived in Washington, where I was able to join the Rogue Artists That Enjoy Landscapes (RATEL). That was an informal group of about 24 artists who met regularly to paint on location. Depending on the weather and time of year, there would be from three to 24 artists heading off to camp and paint for three or four days. We worked from dawn to dusk and forgot about everything that might get in the way of painting. I would complete as many as five paintings in a day. That was exactly what I needed at that stage of my artistic development.”

Pettit was not a complete novice when she traveled with the RATEL group; she had been successfully working as a studio painter. “I painted in watercolor for many years but wanted to switch to oils and be less dependent on photographs,” she recalls. “On my first excursions into the field, I felt obligated to paint the exact colors, shapes, and compositions I observed, but in time I gained the confidence and critical skills needed to edit what I saw, manipulate the paint, emphasize the abstract elements of the composition, and express my feelings as well as my observations.”

Now when Pettit ventures out near her rural home in Utah or joins artists at a plein air festival, she uses the pattern of sunlight and shadow to define the pictorial space, the balance of warm and cool colors, and the character of the land formations within her vision. Oil colors are laid onto the surface of her panels as though they were mosaic tiles, laid next to each other as independent but harmonious shapes. Little effort is made to conceal the brushwork and palette.
knife textures with smooth edges or blended tones. The illusion of real trees, rocks, grasses, figures, and buildings comes only when a viewer steps back from a painting and allows the shapes to coalesce into a seamless presentation.

Pettit makes a genuine effort to maintain the same look in her studio paintings that she achieves on location, not changing the way patches of color define the space and movement of light. She might sharpen the contrast between light and dark shapes or use separated warm and cool colors to define the depth of space, but the overall effect is the same whether the painting is created in the studio or out in the open.

In recent years, Pettit has focused more on studio painting than plein air as she becomes more interested in complicated landscape scenes. “I use my plein air paintings and photographs as resources for studio work, but before I start working on a large stretched canvas I try out a number of approaches in small 5 x 7 or 6 x 8-inch studies,” she says. “Once my ideas are clearly vetted, I draw on the stretched canvas with thin mixtures of oil colors to block in the dark shapes and relative values. Once satisfied with the enlarged composition, I work with brushes and palette knives to build up layers of oil color that remain loose and abstract until the rough image is expressing what I feel about the scene, then I add details. I sometimes struggle to keep the paint strokes active and gestured, but I admit to a tendency to become too detailed as I get closer to finishing a painting.”

The palette of colors that Pettit uses includes alizarin crimson, quinacridone rose,
ARTIST PROFILE

Cliff Dweller in an early stage of development

Cliff Dweller
2015, oil, 28 x 22 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

Close to Home
2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Collection Illume Gallery, Salt Lake City, UT
Plein air
El Paseo
2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Courtesy the Mission Gallery, St. George, UT
Plein air
cadmium red, cadmium lemon, cadmium yellow, phthalo green, cerulean blue, ultramarine blue, Portland gray dark, burnt sienna, and titanium white. She doesn’t add medium to the oil colors when working on location, but she does add Gamblin Neo Megilp when painting in her studio.

M. Stephen Doherty is editor-in-chief of PleinAir.

See more of Rachel Pettit’s plein air and studio work in the expanded digital edition of PleinAir.

Caputo’s
2015, oil, 8 x 10 in.
Private collection
Plein air
ARTIST PROFILE

Autumn in Zion
2013, oil, 18 x 24 in.
Courtesy the Mission Gallery,
St. George, UT
Studio

Winter Light
2014, oil, 20 x 16 in.
Private collection
Studio

Catching the Western Sun
2015, oil, 12 x 16 in.
Courtesy the Mission Gallery, St. George, UT
Studio

Winter Light
2014, oil, 20 x 16 in.
Private collection
Studio
**ARTIST PROFILE**

*Rimrock in Evening Light*
2015, oil, 22 x 28 in.
Collection the artist
Studio

*Moran Point*
2015, oil, 16 x 20 in.
*Courtesy the Mission Gallery, St. George, UT*
Studio

*Alpine Mist*
2015, oil, 28 x 22 in.
Collection the artist
Studio